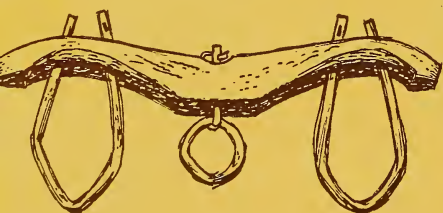


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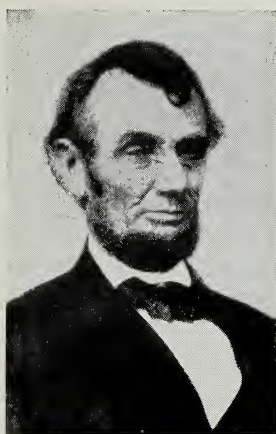
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ABRAHAM LINCOLN: MIRACLE OF DEMOCRACY

By

ROBERT L. KINCAID, LL.D., D.Litt.

President Emeritus, Lincoln Memorial University
Harrogate, Tennessee




Address at Annual Meeting

LINCOLN FELLOWSHIP OF WISCONSIN

Madison

February 10, 1959



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CONCERNING ROBERT L. KINCAID—Educator, Historian

THE APPENDED address by one of our distinguished Lincoln specialists was a fitting Sesquicentennial year contribution to our thinking on the elements that brought Abraham Lincoln from humble beginnings to his magnificent destiny and to his enduring place in history. Near fabulous in the extremes that marked Lincoln's development from cabin to White House, that life career needs just such an interpretation as is here offered in portraying Lincoln as the "the miracle of democracy."

The message goes further by envisaging a Lincoln of mid-twentieth century

if faced with grave dilemmas that presently harass the entire free world. Here we find the author's provocative conclusion: "He (Lincoln) would not modify the philosophy he expressed in his 'House divided' speech; he would change the words a little and say. 'The world cannot endure half slave and half free.'"




The author, Dr. Robert L. Kincaid, now president emeritus of Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee, delivered this address to the Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin in February, 1959. His thinking on this subject grows out of a lifetime of Lincoln scholarship—a heritage from long association with LMU in the Cumberland Gap area of Tennessee-Kentucky. En-

rolling there as a student in 1912, he was graduated in 1915. The later years found him in executive capacities: Secretary from 1916 to 1923; vice-president for ten years before elevated to the presidency in 1947. He retired with rank of emeritus president in 1958. His Alma Mater gave him the honorary Doctor of Laws degree in 1937, and from the University of Chattanooga he received that of Doctor of Literature in 1956.

Dr. Kincaid attended the Missouri School of Journalism in 1915-1916. Today he serves on the editorial board and as contributing editor of *The Lincoln Herald*, the all-Lincoln magazine of LMU, of which he was formerly editor-in-chief, and as an editorial consultant of the magazine "Civil War History." He now lives at Middlesboro, Kentucky, not far from Harrogate, and has resumed an active interest in the management of the *Middlesboro Daily News*, which he had served as editor and manager from 1925 to 1927. There also he is continuing his historical quests. Among his published works are "Joshua Speed, Lincoln's Intimate Friend," and "The Wilderness Road." He was named as one of the 77 honorary members of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission (national), in recognition of his outstanding contributions to Lincolniana—L.W.B.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
“MIRACLE OF DEMOCRACY”

By Robert L. Kincaid, LL.D., D.Litt.

HE FAMOUS cartoonist, H. T. Webster, of the New York Herald-Tribune, always used February 12 to depict some phase of the Lincoln story. Once he sketched a snowy scene in which two men, dressed in coonskin caps and leather jackets, were meeting on a frontier road. One was riding a horse and the other was on foot, with a gun and a dog. They exchanged greetings and the news of the day. The man on horseback asked, “What’s new out there, neighbor?” The other replied, “Nuthin’ atall, nuthin’ atall, ’cept a new baby down at Tom Lincoln’s. Nuthin’ ever happens out here.”

On another occasion Webster used a simpler idea. In a few stark lines he drew a little log cabin in the center of a drab frontier clearing. From a short daubed chimney a thin wisp of smoke rose to a wintry sky. Underneath was the caption: “Ill-fed, ill-clad, ill-housed. February 12, 1809.” That was all.

But that was not all I saw in the picture. I saw the Capitol of our nation on the banks of the Potomac. I saw the White House resplendent in its beauty. I saw a magnificent temple housing the statue of a brooding, noble figure peering through giant columns toward the towering obelisk of Washington’s monument and the white dome of the Capitol building. In the contrast of the lonely scene in the Kentucky wilderness with the seat of government of a great nation, I saw a miracle of democracy unfold.

We cannot explain this miracle, but we can say it is symbolic of America. It is typical of what can come to any American youth who is born into the freedom and independence guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. Whether we are rich or poor, whether we lead or follow, our lives are shaped in the same pattern and protected by the same rights which sheltered Abraham Lincoln along his lonely path to greatness. We are born, we grow up, we take part in community affairs, and we leave the world a little better than we found it. That is American opportunity. That is the miracle of Abraham Lincoln.

Today we would say that the lad born one hundred and fifty years ago was underprivileged. He had no nobility of birth. He had no sponsoring benefactor. He received no dole from a paternalistic government. He had no schools to attend except little shelters where off and on he learned to read, write and cipher. He had no scholarships to enable him to attend an institution of higher learning. All he had was within himself—a great mind, and ambition to improve himself, and a generous and understanding heart. But he had something more, something which most of us accept as a matter of course and with little appreciation. He had citizenship in a free country where his only limitations to get ahead were his own abilities and efforts.

If we follow Lincoln from his birth until he became a national figure, we can only marvel at the unfolding miracle. We cannot say that Lincoln was predestined to achieve greatness. His youthful ambitions were normal ones. His efforts to improve himself were not really exceptional. Nothing in his early life indicates he felt he was any different from other frontier youth of his time. He recognized and accepted without complaint his humble status. But he had his dreams and a deep earnestness of purpose. He had said, "I'll study and get ready and perhaps my chance will come." He could not divine what that chance would be.

In analyzing the growth of young Lincoln, we are impressed only with his remarkable mind and how he applied himself. He chopped wood, split rails, and sweated with honest toil, although he admitted he never particularly liked hard work. He learned about people, swapped stories with them, and took part in community affairs. At New Salem, when he was at last on his own, he secured by accident a set of Blackstone's Commentaries. He borrowed and mastered what books he could find. He studied Euclid and qualified as a surveyor. He went to the Illinois legislature and became acquainted with political affairs. He read law in a friend's office and was admitted to the bar while deep in debt. He shared a friend's room without cost for four years while building a law practice. He made speeches, wrote letters on political matters, represented many clients with little or no pay, married and began to rear a family.

At forty-five Lincoln was only a local political figure, liked for his friendly and easy-going ways, and admired for his honesty, integrity, forthrightness and resourcefulness in debate. Compared to the prominence of many of his associates and neighbors he was just an average man of modest circumstances. But for the middle-aged Lincoln himself, he had come a long way from the little cabin in the Kentucky wilderness, and he could look with satisfaction on his accomplishments. He had a comfortable home, a growing family, a lucrative law practice, and was popular with his political constituents. Elected to Congress, he did not particularly distinguish himself and did not run for re-election. Except for a few partisan friends who may have recognized his potentialities of leadership, no one then considered he was destined for any unusual public service.

Yet within five years Lincoln was called upon to lead his country through its most conclusive crisis. What happened? How was this man transformed from a political unknown into a leader of national stature? It is at this point in Lincoln's career we see emerging the elements of greatness.

Lincoln had already formed his basic political philosophies. He was passionately devoted to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He studied the lives of the Founding Fathers and made their philosophy his own. He saw with prophetic wisdom the disasters which would come to the Republic if every citizen were not guaranteed "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He believed that the union of states would ensure these

blessings to every citizen, and he would struggle with all his power to protect and preserve that union from dissolution. He could not remain silent in the great debate of the national issues then sweeping the land.

It was Lincoln's speech on June 16, 1858, before the Illinois Republican Convention which revealed his intellectual stature, his convincing logic, his matured political philosophy, and his comprehensive grasp of the problems facing the nation. He made the main issue clear by his Biblical quotation, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." He declared, "I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other." This summation of the main issue, so clearly and eloquently expressed, the people could understand. It was flashed across the land and repeated in every loyal household. Overnight Lincoln became the chief spokesman for all who believed in preserving the Union and the ultimate eradication of slavery as one of the major evils which beset it.

In his debates with Stephen A. Douglas which followed in the Illinois Senatorial campaign, Lincoln adroitly and masterfully brought the national issues into sharp focus. He resolved the legal question of territorial sovereignty and extension of slavery into one of human justice and morality. He crowded the eloquent and popular Douglas into the indefensible position of condoning human bondage. Although he lost the election, he came out of the contest a national figure. He was ready for his Cooper Institute speech of February 27, 1860, in which he further clarified his position. He was praised by Eastern leaders and the nation's press for his logic, understanding, and temperate approach to the solution of the slavery question. His closing words in that memorable address became a ringing call to a nation's conscience: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Lincoln was now no longer an obscure country lawyer and politician from the frontier west. He spoke as "one having authority," and deeply impressed the people with his profound wisdom, his breadth of understanding, and realistic concept of the problems of the nation. His subsequent nomination for the presidency at the Chicago convention may have seemed a political accident, but his stature as a statesman was at last clearly evident.

Lincoln assumed the presidency of the United States apparently with fewer qualifications for that office than any man in our history. He was utterly lacking in administrative experience. His education, as he had said, was "defective." His acquaintance with the leaders of his time was confined largely to his own state. He revealed no special ability in organizing and managing large scale operations. He recognized his own shortcomings and the magnitude of the task before him. With a plaintive note he said to his friends in Spring-

field on his departure for Washington, "A duty devolves upon me which is, perhaps, greater than that which devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington."

So it was that Lincoln went to Washington,—lonely, doubtful, worried by the dangers threatening the nation, disturbed by the growing secession in the South, and with no fixed policy to cope with the problems he would be required to solve. The nation was breaking asunder; the important leaders of his own party were doubtful and sometimes scornful of his ability to hold back the engulfing tide of rebellion; the people loyal to the Union were demanding decisive action and a resolute standing in dealing with the dissident elements. In the interim between his election and inauguration, he appeared to be a confused and harassed man who knew not what to do or how to do it. In his own heart he was buoyed by one resolve: "The Union must and shall be preserved!" He had a supreme faith that somehow it would be done, and he was calm and unmoved when all about him were the strident voices of fear, confusion, and bitterness.

The story of how Abraham Lincoln mastered the problems of the presidency and saved the Union from dismemberment is familiar to every American. It is an amazing epic of heroic magnitude, and I will not dwell upon it. I have explained how he came to national leadership only to emphasize the unfolding miracle of his greatness. It was not what Lincoln had already accomplished when he was elected president which portended his success; it was his qualities of character, ability, devotion and astuteness in handling men and issues which enabled him to master every complex situation and to resolve every crisis successfully. He had his shortcomings, disappointments and failures, but in his steadfast pursuit of his larger goals his achievements were unparalleled in human history.

It has been less than a hundred years since Lincoln walked among us. Yet in that short period more has been written about him than any other historical character. H. G. Wells said of him: "We are safe in including Lincoln in our list of six permanently great figures." Calvin Coolidge once stated: "Lincoln surpasses all others in those attributes which men feel are common in them all. In him they find the pure and unmixed elements of human greatness." Woodrow Wilson explained it another way: "The man Lincoln had no special gift. He was of general use. He was like some special instrument of humanity. Wherever life touched him he spoke back its meaning. Each power slumbered in him to be awakened . . . There was something native, natural rather than singular, and wholly inexhaustible about him." Lloyd George gave the supreme tribute: "Lincoln is the greatest man grown on the American continent."

So it is that the world applauds the man whose birth we celebrate on this sesquicentennial. As writers and speakers and commentators search for words to add lustre to his fame, they can only repeat the substance of a tribute which Homer Hoch of Kansas gave in the halls of Congress on February 12, 1923:

‘There is no new thing to be said of Lincoln. There is no new thing to be said of the mountains, or of the sea, or of the stars. The years may go their way, but the same old mountains lift their granite shoulders above the drifting clouds, the same mysterious sea beats upon the shore, the same silent stars keep holy vigil above a tired world. But to mountains and sea and stars men turn forever in unwearied homage. And thus with Lincoln. For he was mountain in grandeur of soul, he was sea in deep undervoice of mystic loneliness; he was star in steadfast purity of purpose and service. And he abides.”

It is not enough for us on this anniversary to meet for the sole purpose of honoring the memory of the man whose leadership insured the future greatness of America. Rather as we contemplate the events of his career, we should draw lessons from his life and achievements for this uncertain and disturbing period in world history. The issues which faced Lincoln a century ago are little different from what concerns us today. Then Lincoln pointed the way for national survival within the framework of a democracy under great stress; then the dangers of dissolution and decadence were within our own nation. Today we face not only internal dangers, but also a divided world in which there is a life and death struggle to survive.

If Lincoln were with us today, he would not modify the philosophy he expressed in his “House Divided” speech. He would change the words a little and would say, “The **world** cannot endure, half slave and half free.” He would also declare, “This nation, under God, must remain dedicated to the great task before us; that a new birth of freedom must be assured for all peoples struggling to remain free; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.” And he would have a global concept of our country’s mission in the present world struggle.

In solving one of our major domestic problems, we can safely follow the guidance and philosophy of Lincoln in his steadfast reliance upon the charters of liberty, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. To him these were basic and unassailable instruments which should not be warped, distorted, disregarded nor circumvented by loose or opportunistic interpretations to provide quick and temporary solutions of our national problems. He felt these documents of human liberty were not to be trifled with lightly because of the danger of losing what they preserved. Hear him plead, when he was only twenty-nine years old, that we should make the Constitution “the political religion of the nation”:

“Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to his posterity swear by the blood of the Revolution never to violate in the least particular the laws of the country, and never to tolerate their violation by others . . . Let reverence for the laws . . . be taught in schools, seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in primers, spelling books, and in almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpits, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation.”

In urging this “strict observance of all laws,” Lincoln explained that legal provisions exist for the repeal of bad laws or for redress of grievances under their application. Until such laws are repealed or amended, he affirmed they should be “borne with, if not too intolerable.”

Today we are witnessing a widespread defiance of a Supreme Court ruling. Some state officials, although sworn to observe, protect and defend the Constitution, are instigating and leading a “massive resistance” movement against this decree. Blindly they are creating among their people an emotional attitude of non-compliance for our fundamental laws which, if not checked, can only result in anarchy and ruin. The tragedy is not so much the lack of foresight and statesmanship of these misguided leaders who should know better. Rather it is the grave danger their acts and philosophies will create in our young people a callous attitude of defiance and bold rebellion against all constituted authority. Against this Lincoln would speak with all the fervor of his soul!

When the crisis of the '60s was approaching, Lincoln was even more positive in his convictions about a danger which might come to our nation. In 1858 he said:

“What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling seacoasts, our Army and Navy. These are not our reliance against tyranny. All of these may be turned against us without making us weaker for the struggle. Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors. Familiarize yourself with the chains of bondage, and you prepare your own limbs to wear them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of others, you have lost the genius of your own independence and become fit subjects of the cunning tyrant who rises among you.”

In this declaration, Lincoln described the one sure way our nation could be destroyed. He expressed his faith in his country's destiny by emphasizing the spirit of independence within our people, lest we should become complacent, weak and divided, and “fit subjects” for the rule of tyranny. It is true he lived at a time when domestic policies were the dominant issues. There was then no giant nation reaching across the world with the avowed purpose of bringing all peoples within its orbit of totalitarian control. But in his prophetic wisdom, Lincoln saw clearly our greatest danger would lie within ourselves, that if “destruction be our lot, we ourselves would be its author and finisher, that as a nation of free men we must live through all time or died by suicide.”

If Lincoln were speaking to us today, how much would he amplify these statements which he considered axiomatic? One thing we can be sure: His devotion to the principles of individual liberty and freedom would be unchanged. His position on keeping our nation strong and our people vigilantly alert and

dedicated to the ideals of democracy would be unswerving. He might say, as he did on one occasion, "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do and how to do it." But with that statement he would proceed with cold logic and lucid reasoning to proclaim that our nation must be kept strong within, and that our people must maintain an eternal vigilance against the encroachments of tyranny, if right and justice are to triumph and freedom is not "to perish from the earth." In that faith and confidence, he would call upon our people "to strive on to finish the work we are in . . . and to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

I am sure Lincoln would also remind us of our global obligations in the ideological conflict which now divides the world. Perhaps he would turn to the Bible for an apt quotation, as he was wont to do, and point out that this nation has "come into the kingdom for such a time as this;" a time when it is the most favored nation on earth; when it represents the hope of free people against alien forces seeking to enslave mankind. With his profound sense of history, Lincoln would modify little the appeal he made to Congressional leaders on December 1, 1862:

"Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we are passing will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We hold the power and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of earth."

These stirring words should challenge us today. Should they not inspire all of us,—leaders and citizens alike,—as we go about our daily affairs, listen to the confusion of tongues in high places, hear the beeps of orbiting satellites in the heavens, and ponder the responsibility our nation now has in its position of leadership? It may indeed be true that America is destined to "nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of earth."

Perhaps it is idle to speculate further on the kind of leadership Lincoln would give us. Certainly our nation is larger and the world is smaller. Since Lincoln's time many changes have taken place. Empires have decayed and fallen; colonial systems have been displaced; autocrats riding crests of ruthless power have been engulfed in tempests of their own making; and political and economic revolutions still shake the world. During this period our own country has been swept into world-wide cataclysms. But it has survived each holocaust to emerge with a higher standard of living and with greater freedom for the individual than enjoyed by any people on earth. It still remains strong and free while the rest

of the world flounders in violent changes and eruptions. Can we not say our survival is because we have held fast to the principles of government which Lincoln preserved?

I wish it were possible for every American to join the pilgrimages which are being made to the Lincoln shrines during this sesquicentennial period. Go to his humble birthplace at Hodgenville, Kentucky. Visit his mother's grave in the quiet woodland of the Nancy Hanks Park in Indiana. Spend some time in the reconstructed village of New Salem in Illinois where young Lincoln formed his philosophies and developed his life purposes. Visit Lincoln's home in Springfield where he reached his maturity. Travel to Washington and catch the spirit of Lincoln so majestically portrayed in the magnificent monument there. Then turn back to Springfield to pause for a while at the place where his mortal remains are entombed. By following this solitary path from his birth to his martyrdom you will feel the impact of the powerful personality and overwhelming greatness of this miracle of democracy.

Something deep and abiding flows into the heart of everyone who makes such a pilgrimage. You may begin your journey with only a casual and superficial interest. But before you have traveled far, Lincoln becomes a living and ageless figure. You feel his presence, hear his chuckles, enjoy his droll stories, and become captivated by his warm and generous personality. You feel at ease in the presence of the tall, awkward, easygaited man who walks along with you. When you see him in debate, his plain and mobile face lighting with the fervor of his thoughts, you marvel at the clarity, beauty, logic and poetic rhythm of his matchless words. You know that here is no ordinary man, and that he has been endowed with qualities of wisdom and greatness which lift him into immortality.

When Charles Evans Hughes was Governor of New York, he said on a Lincoln birthday occasion: "I wish in our colleges and wherever young men are trained, particularly for political life, that there could be a course in Lincoln. I wish our young men could be taken through the long efforts of his career; I wish they could become more intimately acquainted with the addresses he delivered; I wish they could get in close touch with that remarkable personality; and they would never find it possible to take a low or sordid view of American opportunity."

This was no idle statement. But the great jurist could have expanded his statement. He could have added that Lincoln's leadership defines the ideals and principles by which governments are maintained to insure that truth and justice, peace and goodwill, freedom and opportunity are the heritage for all who seek the blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The character in H. T. Webster's cartoon said, "Nothing has happened around here 'cept a new baby down at Tom Lincoln's." And the little baby was "ill-fed, ill-clad, and ill-housed." But the birth of that baby one hundred and fifty

years ago changed the course of history. It may well be the event which will light free men "down to the latest generation" as they struggle to preserve "the last, best hope of earth."

History has its lessons for times like these, and it speaks with trumpet tongues. So we can turn to the example of Lincoln for courage and hope, for guidance and wisdom, for devotion and dedication. He gave us a pattern, a philosophy, a way of life which we can safely follow. Let us make the Lincoln story a conscious and compelling factor in our national life, that we may vitalize the meaning of democracy in our concepts, and renew our vows at our sacred shrines.

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- 1950—"The Lincoln Statue at the University of Wisconsin," Address at Ceremonies of Acceptance and of Dedication (1909) of Only Replica of the Adolph A. Weiman Statue at Hodgenville, Kentucky.
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- 1959—"Confederate General Ben Hardin Helm: Kentucky Brother-in-Law of Abraham Lincoln," Address at Annual Meeting of Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, by R. Gerald McMurtry, Fort Wayne, Indiana.
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